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Annotation #3
Film Title: What Would Jesus Buy?
Word Count: 1116

Title, director and release year?

What Would Jesus Buy? is a documentary directed by Rob VanAlkemade. It first debut at South By Southwest on March 11, 2007, and later went into general US release on November 16, 2007.

What is the central argument or narrative of the film?

The narrative of this documentary follows “the church of stop shopping” led by “Reverend Billy” on a mission to raise awareness of commercialization of Christmas. The preaching throughout the film repeatedly refers to the concept of “shopocalypse” where Americans perpetuate materialism, consumerism, and overconsumption by shopping to death. The film also sheds light on the conditions of sweatshops, abusive use of foreign labor, and the elimination of small, family-owned business.

How is the argument or narrative made and sustained? How much scientific information is provided, for example? Does the film have emotional appeal?

The persuasive power of this film lies in the storytelling capability of video footages. Since Reverend Billy’s actions are the most powerful tools to get his message across. The controversial things he and his group did during the tour across the country adequately sustains the story. It only gets better when there is a discernible growth of attention from media and law enforcements as the tour progresses. Surrounding people’s reactions from Reverend Billy’s shocking actions lends substantially more credentials to the narrative.

In the beginning of the film, there are noticeably more scientific information about consumerism to put the problem in context. Regardless, this documentary basically rely solely on emotional appeal from Reverend Billy putting himself in danger to persuade audience. This claim becomes more concrete due to the inclusion of the bus crash where many injured members of the “church of stop shopping” are shown with unperturbed determination to complete the tour even afterwards.

What sustainability problems does the film draw out? (Political, Legal, Economic, Technological, Media and informational, Organizational, Educational, Behavioral, Cultural, Ecological?)

This documentary definitely draws a lot of attention to the cultural around Christmas celebration. In most American family, Christmas remains one of the most important holidays that must be celebrated. However, many consumerist Americans no longer know how to spend Christmas without buying gifts for everyone. The true meaning of Christmas has been lost in the chaos of gifting, which blatantly points to the media for helping prepare for such a frantic shopping spree across the country. The media, in complete service of large corporations, pays no attention to the impacts on the environment and only knows to tell people to buy more and more because the more you gift is believed to equate with the more you love. Additionally, the fact that young

kids can specifically ask for what they want from Santa reveal a serious problem with the advertising industry, as well as legal regulations related to the industry. No children should be targeted at such a young age for training them to become lifelong consumerists. In some countries, it would actually be illegal to advertise towards children under the age of 12. For the adults, credit card debts present huge financial headaches for them when it comes time to pay the bills. The “spend first, pay later” mentality of credit cards can dig bottomless hole for some people to jump in.

What parts of the film did you find most persuasive and compelling? Why?

I most persuasive and compelling part of the film is its choice of narrative. A successful story in this type of documentary is so much more convincing and inspiring to the audience, which is clearly evident throughout the cross country tour. The “church of stop shopping” began as a small performance group on the streets of New York. As the story progresses, it is easy to notice the growth in the size of the gatherings and importance of locations. The places they tour become more and more iconically consumerism, like Mall of America, Wal-Mart headquarter, and Disney Land. The growing attention from law enforcement also adds tension to the story.

What parts of the film were you not compelled or convinced by? Why?

My biggest critique for this documentary is the lack of a real climax in the storyline. The footages start to get extremely uncreative and repetitive even before the mid point of the hour-and-a-half documentary. Despite the increasing number of followers, the tactics and results remain the same—the group perform at a location until they get kicked out. Reactions from the audience, shown in the film at least, are no more than feeling intrigued, shocked, or slightly resonated.

The other pet peeve I found was his performing style. In my opinion, his “preaching style” is excessively exaggerated. Watching the first 3 footages was entertaining, but his obnoxiousness gets old way too quickly to the point I do not want to continue watching anymore.

What audiences does the film best address? Why?

The film is meant to address everyone, just like his live performances. When Reverend Billy and his church goes to a location, they do not pick the right audience to perform to. Although most the places shown in the film are commercial properties, it does not mean everyone there is a consumer who would purchase shop for the holidays beyond reason. Reverend Billy surely wishes more people would have encountered his group so that he can spread his message to more people, and the film serves just that purpose. A small nitpick is that his intrusive way to convey a message is not really for everybody.

What could have been added to this film to enhance its environmental educational value?

As a film devoted to environmental sustainability-related issues, more negative consequences ought to be presented for greater convincing power. The audience must the urgency to act otherwise something bad will happen to them soon. Showing people’s struggle with credit card debts and the situation with child labor abuse overseas are arguably steps towards the right direction.

What kinds of actions and points of intervention are suggested by the film? If the film itself does not suggest corrective action, describe actions that you can imagine being effective.

One very positive aspect of the film is the abundance of suggestions embedded to fight against overconsumption during holiday seasons. As Reverend Billy screams, stop buying gifts for Christmas as if they must do that with everyone else. The central message is to find the essence of Christmas, which is the gathering of people of gift exchanging. If you cannot get away with not shopping at all, then start with buying half as much as last year, and eventually get out of the consumerist pit.

What additional information has the film compelled you to seek out? (Provide at least two supporting references.)

Reverend Billy's over-the-top style led me to sense the becoming of Christian traditions as an object of ridicule. In fact, some critics believe the playful sacrilegious use of Christian forms is condescending and cheapens Christianity, but some other Christians praise Reverend Billy for returning Christ to his radical roots. Some other viewers also acknowledge Reverend Billy's Christian appearance tie in faith with shopping habits. Overall, the reception within religious communities can be concluded as positive.

Following up with the abusive use of cheap labor overseas, most big American corporations are known to have relocated their factories to countries where employment regulations are not strictly enforced to maintain a source of cheap goods for sale. However, illegal employment sometimes happen within United States as well. A woman reported that she would have to sew 67 vests per hour for Forever 21 to earn a \$8 minimum wage.

Resources:

- <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/novemberweb-only/whatwouldjesusbuy.html?paging=off>
- <http://www.businessinsider.com/the-secret-behind-forever-21s-dirt-cheap-clothing-2012-2>